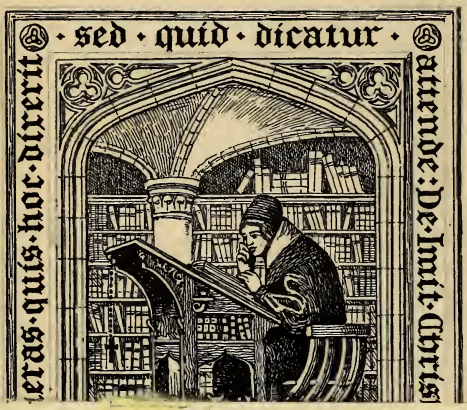

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GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

AS MAN AND AUTHOR

BY

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
153–157, FIFTH AVENUE
MDCCCXCV

1865

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GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

AS MAN AND AUTHOR

I

THE literature of modern as distinguished from mediæval Europe began with three Italian poets—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The common characteristic which makes these men modern, and separates them from their mediæval predecessors, is that three main types of imaginative writing assumed with them the quality of monumental art. If we wish to comprehend the theology, the political ideas, the allegories, and the mental temper of the Middle Ages, expressed in a coherent work of the imagination, we must go to the "Divine Comedy." In Petrarch's

"Canzoniere" the love-mysticism and the lyrics of Provence attain their ultimate perfection. Boccaccio's "Decameron" elevates the legends of a hundred generations, dimly floating in the memories of men, to the rank of clear self-conscious art, and inaugurates a form of prose-narrative which in the novel has superseded epic poetry.

Three things make the work of these great writers monumental. One is their firm grasp upon the forms they severally used, whereby diffuse and vague materials of various sorts were wrought into imperishable plastic shape. The second is the keen emergence of their personalities as men, that penetration of the art-work with the artist's self which was conspicuously absent in mediæval compositions. The third is the vivacity of their sensations, the awakened life, the resuscitated realism, the fine analysis of motives, the nice discrimination of physical and moral qualities; all of which transports us from a world of dreams and abstractions into the world of fact and nature.

Dante takes for his province the drama of the human soul in its widest scope; Petrarch takes the heart of an individual man, himself; Boccaccio takes the complex stuff of daily life, the *quicquid agunt homines* of common experience. These are their several subjects. Out of them Dante creates the epic, Petrarch the lyric, Boccaccio the novel.

As their work was monumental so was it final. There could not be a second "Divine Comedy," a second "Canzoniere," a second "Decameron," except in imitations of greater or lesser literary merit. These three poets closed and consummated a lengthy period of thought and emotion. It was impossible to repeat them, just as it was impossible to repeat Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare. At the same time they opened a new era, by exhibiting the freedom of the individual artist's genius, which during the Middle Ages had nowhere emerged into independent self-sufficiency.

The three founders of modern literature

were Florentines by origin; and their lives followed at brief intervals, within a narrow space of time. Dante was born in 1265, Petrarch in 1304, Boccaccio in 1313. Between 1321 (the date of Dante's death) and 1361 (the date of Boccaccio's conversion) the "Divine Comedy," the "Canzoniere," and the "Decameron" were secured as inalienable possessions for posterity.

Dante belonged to the old nobility of Florence, who fought the battles of Guelf and Ghibelline upon the plains of Tuscany. Petrarch sprang from Florentine parents of the middle class, exiled in the same quarrels; growing up without a home or city, he became a cosmopolitan by culture. Boccaccio derived his doubtful blood from a merchant of no birth or breeding, one of those men whose immediate ancestors were villeins from the country admitted to Florentine burghership in a moment of democratic expansiveness. Of such people Dante spoke in his scornful aristocratic way as follows: "In

those olden days the citizenship, which now is adulterated with folk of Campi, and Certaldo, and Figghine, was pure and unmixed down to the least artisan. Oh! how much better would it have been to have kept those people for our neighbours, and to have restricted Florence to her ancient circuit of three miles or four, than to clasp them with us now inside our walls, suffering the stench of rustics from Aguglion and Signa, whose eyes are grown already sharp for dirty gain!"

Thus Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio represented the three main elements of Florentine society in the last years of the Middle Ages—the *popolo vecchio*, the *popolo grasso*, and the *popolo minuto*, as these were severally called. It is not trivial to notice that Boccaccio, with whom we are principally concerned, issued from the class which ultimately rose to power in Florence; the class which chose the Medici, themselves of no high blood, for rulers; the class which raised their city to literary and artistic splendour in the first years of the

Renaissance; the class which reduced that city to moral and political impotence in its decline. To this class, then, the class in the ascendant, Boccaccio belonged; and, of the three founders of modern literature, he exercised by far the most potent and far-reaching influence over his immediate successors. Not Dante in any department whatsoever, not Petrarch in more than a limited sphere of lyric poetry, but Boccaccio dominated Italian taste for three successive centuries. I am speaking of vernacular art, not of scholarship; and I hope to prove my assertion by showing how many literary types, of great vogue in the Renaissance, were due to Boccaccio's creative instinct.

It seems paradoxical to say this. Everybody can see for himself that, of these three poets, Dante was first, Petrarch second, and Boccaccio third in force of character and quality of genius. Yet the fact that Boccaccio did more than his superiors to mould and influence Italian literature admits of demonstra-

tion. The cause is obvious. While all three held in a great measure by the past, Boccaccio was the one whose temperament and favourite forms of art anticipated the future. He alone grew with the growing age, in his substitution of sensual and concrete for mystical and abstract ideals, in his joyous acceptance of nature and the world, in his frank abandonment of theological, scholastic, and political preoccupations. The Italians of the Renaissance turned their back on metaphysics, treated allegory with cynical insolence, neglected the burning questions of Church and Empire as unpractical and antiquated. What then was Dante for them but a grim and sphinx-like symbol of the past, whose majesty inspired a kind of irksome awe? The Italians of the Renaissance disbelieved in chivalry and Platonic love; they wanted to enjoy plenty, and to take their fill of carnal pleasure. What then was Petrarch for them but a perfect master in the art of writing compliments, and veiling crude desire in artificial forms of

decent verse? With Boccaccio they felt themselves at home. He knew life as they knew it; he wanted what they wanted; he painted men and women as they actually were, moving about the streets and fields of their own native land. His realism was theirs; his insincerity was theirs; his easy-going acceptance of allegorical forms which had lost their hold upon his faith, but which were useful as a fig-leaf for the nakedness of human appetites, suited their temper and their sense of decorum; his toleration of the powers that be, his panegyric of a Semiramis who had patronised him, his disengagement from troublesome public affairs, his devotion to art for art's sake, jumped precisely with their humour. And then he gave them so much amusement, so many new species of literature, agreeable and easy to deal with—the novel in prose as sparkling as the tights of Harlequin, the romance in long-drawn octave stanzas, the idyll in mixed verse and prose, the obscure satire, the pompous impassioned chaunt of palpitating love. The

reasons, as I take it, are not far to seek why Boccaccio eclipsed Dante and even Petrarch with their immediate posterity.

From Dante through Petrarch to Boccaccio; from Beatrice through Laura to La Fiammetta —from woman as an allegory of the noblest thoughts and purest stirrings of the soul, through woman as the symbol of all beauty worshipped at a distance, to woman as man's lover kindling and reciprocating passionate desire; from the "Divine Comedy," through the "Canzoniere" to the "Decameron"—from the eternal world of man's fixed self-created destiny, through the transitory world of trembling introspective sentiment to the positive world of fact and act in which we play our parts; from mystic *terza rima*, through stately stanzas, to Protean prose—from verse built up into cathedral dignity with mathematical precision, through lyrics light as arabesques and pointed with the steely touch of polished style, to that free form of speech which takes all moods and lends itself alike to

low and lofty themes: such was the rapid movement of Italian genius within the brief space of some fifty years. So quickly did the Renaissance emerge from the Middle Ages; and when the voices of that august trio were silenced in the grave, the echo of the last and least of them widened and grew louder through the spacious times to come.

In these observations upon Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, I have hitherto presented them only as Italian poets who inaugurated modern European literature. There is, however, another point to be considered. They came at the moment when our intellectual ancestors, moulded by the Middle Ages, were destined to repiece the broken chain which linked the men of modern times with classical antiquity. Dante had nothing to do with what is called the Revival of Learning; and this is one cause why his sublime genius possessed little attraction for men who made that revival their prime interest. But we who now look back upon the Renaissance, are able to perceive how

strongly modern pulses throbbed in him. While he dealt with the enduring problems of mankind in the spirit of a mediæval thinker, Dante possessed, as an artist, what was most vital and precious in the temper of the coming age—concrete imagination, grasp on nature through the senses, intuition into the specific qualities of men and things. The vagueness, the dreaminess, the generality of mediævalism disappeared in his work. He did not, however, apply himself to the resuscitation of the classics as the groundwork of a moral type of culture. That task was reserved for Petrarch, the cosmopolitan, the student freed by fate from Dante's tyrannous preoccupations. It was both the weakness and the strength of Petrarch that circumstances left him open to a merely literary impulse. It was Petrarch's weakness, inasmuch as something was deducted from his personality in action; it was Petrarch's strength, in so far as he divined in solitude what Europe needed for the next inevitable step of evolution. Independently, therefore, of his poetical

achievement, Petrarch claims our veneration as the initiator of humanism, of scholarship, of the modern intellectual ideal. He started that movement to which the occidental races owe their common mental atmosphere, their accepted type of education, their independence of scholastic and theological authority, their science, their criticism. All this we designate by such terms as the Revival of Learning or the Renaissance, unmindful of the weighty issues which were involved in that first rupture with the mediæval ways of thought. The *Zeit-geist* needed Petrarch. He, or some one like him, was demanded to effect a necessary transition. In the accomplishment of that unavoidable process, Boccaccio rendered more than yeoman's service. We have to estimate him not only as the author of the "Decameron," not only as the poet who controlled the course of Italian literature in its main currents for three hundred years, but also as the founder of Greek studies and Petrarch's ablest lieutenant in the pioneering work of the Revival.

II

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO was born in the year 1313. We do not know for certain where he was born, who his mother was, and whether he was born in wedlock. His father belonged to a humble family, originally seated at Certaldo in Valdelsa, about eighteen miles distant from Florence. Their ancestors had been admitted to the burghership of the Sovereign State. Accordingly, Giovanni, although he called himself "the son of Boccaccio of Certaldo," and though he regarded Certaldo as his native place or *patria*, enjoyed the privileges of a Florentine citizen. He was never known by any family name; his full denomination being Giovanni di Boccaccio di Chellino da Certaldo, John the son of Boccaccio the son of Chellino

of Certaldo. Relegating the discussion of questions regarding his birthplace and legitimacy to an appendix, this, I think, is all that can be safely affirmed upon the subject of Boccaccio's origin.

Of his early life we know unfortunately very little, and it is impossible to determine its chronology with precision. Two schemes have been suggested through which the scanty data furnished by allusions in his own writings and by the meagre information of contemporaries, may be reduced to order. These depend respectively upon the views we take regarding Boccaccio's first meeting with Fiammetta. The one receives support from the Latin, the other from the Italian version of Filippo Villani's panegyric. It does not greatly signify which scheme we adopt; each presents special difficulties together with certain advantages. In the following sketch of Boccaccio's biography I shall adhere to the one which seems to me upon the whole preferable, after expressing my opinion that no

reliance can be placed upon the accuracy of dates anterior to the year 1350. Yet, in spite of this chronological uncertainty, the main outlines of Boccaccio's boyhood and youth are sufficiently distinct, and the growth of his character may be described with some minuteness.

Giovanni Boccaccio's father was a man of very different temper from the poet. Having begun life as a merchant, he devoted his whole energy and all his thoughts to money-making. It does not appear that the elder Boccaccio was eminently successful in trade; and though he held several offices of trust in the republic, his name has left no trace in history. We have reason to believe that Giovanni remained for many years the only son of this man, and the fact that his mother has not once been mentioned by him leads one to suppose that she died during his infancy. His father's sole ambition was to educate him as a man of business, in order that the slender fortunes of the family, which

he had himself improved, might in the next generation be raised still higher. This caused a rooted disagreement between the two occupants of the gloomy little house in Sta Felicità at Florence. Reviewing his own life upon the threshold of old age, Boccaccio wrote as follows :

"Nature, as experience has proved, drew me from my mother's womb with special aptitudes for poetry ; and in my opinion this was the law for which I was created. Well enough do I remember how my father used his best endeavours, from my earliest boyhood, to make me a man of commerce. Before I entered on the period of youth, but had acquired some knowledge of arithmetic, he put me to a merchant of great consequence, with whom I did nothing for six years but waste irrecoverable time. Being soon forced to perceive that my bent was rather for study than for trade, he next decided that I should apply myself to canon law, with a view to making money ; accordingly I laboured in vain, for about the same space of time, under

a very eminent professor. My mind, however, revolted against both these industries to such an extent that neither the learning of my master nor the authority of my father, by whose commands I was perpetually harassed, nor yet the prayers, or rather the recriminations of my friends, could bend it in either direction. It was wholly drawn by strong affection towards poetry. Not a sudden impulse, but the oldest and most deeply rooted instinct led me upon that path; for I well remember that before I reached the age of seven, before I set eyes on any works of fiction, before I went to school, and when I hardly knew the rudiments of letters, my nature was already urging me to invent, and I began to produce trifling poems. These indeed possessed no value, since my intellectual powers at that tender age were insufficient for such arduous performances. However, when I had well-nigh reached maturity, and was become my own master, then, at no man's bidding and through no man's teaching,

against the opposition of my father who condemned such studies vehemently, I resorted spontaneously to the little which I knew of the poetic art, and this art I have since pursued with the greatest eagerness, studying the works of its professors with incredible delight, and straining all my ability to understand them. And, wonderful to relate, while yet I had no knowledge on what or on how many feet a verse should run; and though I sturdily repelled the appellation, all my acquaintances used to call me poet, which, alas! I am not yet. I doubt not that if my father had been indulgent to my wishes while my mind was pliable in youngest years, I should have turned out one of the world's famous poets. The fact, however, is that through bending my abilities first to lucrative business, and next to a lucrative branch of study, I failed to become either a merchant or a canonist, and missed the chance of being an illustrious poet. To other departments of learning I have paid little attention; for

though they pleased me, they did not compel me with the same attraction. The study of the sacred volumes engaged my attention, but I abandoned it as unfit for my advanced years and moderate abilities, judging it unbecoming for an old man, as it were, to begin the rudiments of a new science, and most indecent for anybody to attempt that which he cannot believe himself capable of performing. Consequently, since I think God was pleased to make literature my vocation, in this I am determined to persevere."

This valuable fragment of autobiography tells us all we really know about Boccaccio's early years, and enables us to map them out with some distinctness. At the age of seven he learned the rudiments of grammar under Giovanni da Strada, and at eleven began his training as a merchant. The six years wasted in that fruitless labour brought him to seventeen, when his father changed his plan of education. We cannot determine who was the eminent jurist under whom he worked during

the next period of six years. Tradition, always eager to unite the names of men illustrious in past ages, identifies this teacher with Cino da Pistoja. But we have reasons for believing that Boccaccio went to reside at Naples before 1330, in which case his legal studies must have been carried on there. Two points, however, are certain. It was at Naples that he finally dedicated his life to literature; and at Naples he met the woman who exercised decisive influence over his career as poet.

Boccaccio's abandonment of lucrative professions may be illustrated by a charming story, which has all the freshness in it of the morning of the modern world. Filippo Villani, a contemporary writer of Florentine biographies, clearly attached importance to the incident he relates; and it is possible that friends of Boccaccio may have heard it from his own lips. "After wandering through many lands, now here, now there, as his commercial engagements prompted, he reached at length the age of twenty-five, when his father's orders led him

to take up his abode in Naples. There it chanced one day that he walked forth alone, and came to the spot where Virgil's dust lies buried. At the sight of this sepulchre Giovanni fell into long musing admiration of the man whose bones it covered, brooding with meditative soul upon the poet's fame, until he fell to lamenting his own fortune, whereby he was compelled against his will to give himself to irksome cares of business. A sudden love of the Pierian Muses smote his heart, and turning homeward he abandoned trade, devoting himself with passionate ardour to poetry; wherein very shortly, aided alike by his noble genius and his burning desire for knowledge, he made marvellous progress. This when his father noticed, and perceived that Heaven-sent instinct had more power with his son than the paternal will, he consented to his studies, and helped him with such assistance as lay within his means." Like all tales of the sort, this story must not be taken literally, but rather as a parable of what did actually happen. Boccaccio has told us in the

passage I have quoted, that it was no sudden impulse which made him devote himself to literature; and it is also incredible that he should have studied canon law for six whole years, without some opportunities of acquiring the rudiments of scholarship for which he thirsted. Indeed, we shall see, when we come to speak of his earliest compositions, that he must have pursued classical studies, if only in a desultory way, for many years.

The lady so renowned in literature as Fiammetta, received the name of Maria from her parents. She was born in wedlock to a Count of Aquino; but her real father was supposed to be Robert of Anjou, king of Naples. Boccaccio first set eyes upon her in the Church of San Lorenzo on the morning of an Easter Eve—possibly in the year 1338. If that date be correct, he was then aged twenty-five, and she was in all probability three years older. She had been married some time to a gentleman whose name and rank are alike unknown to us. It will be

remembered that Petrarch first saw his Laura in a church at Avignon. Laura was also a married woman, with whose domestic life we are unacquainted. There is so much similarity in these two episodes as almost to provoke a query whether Boccaccio was not deliberately imitating his great predecessor and master in the art of poetry. His subsequent relations to Fiammetta are hardly less vague and shadowy than those of Petrarch to Laura. Dealing with this famous romance, one is tempted to wonder whether the young man who had now resolved on literature, did not set up a mistress as part of his necessary equipment. To do so would be, however, inconsistent with sound criticism. A certain element of ideality and indistinctness must be acknowledged in Dante's Beatrice, in Petrarch's Laura, and in Boccaccio's Fiammetta. Yet we are bound to accept these heroines of fame as real women, who powerfully influenced the hearts and minds of their three poet-lovers. It is impossible to transfer ourselves with full

intelligence and sympathy into the psychological conditions of those mediæval love affairs. But that does not justify our evading the difficulties of the problem by curtly saying there is nothing in it.

How Boccaccio, the simple merchant's son from Florence, came to be received into the Court-circle in which Fiammetta moved, admits of some debate. As yet he was undistinguished either as a Latin scholar or as an Italian poet. In all probability he owed his introduction to Niccolo Acciaiuoli, a Florentine of a wealthy and distinguished house, who settled at Naples as a man of business in the year 1331, and afterwards rose by his abilities to the rank of Grand Seneschal and feudatory of the kingdom. However that may be, we should bear in mind that one excellent feature of Italian society was its almost democratic readiness to place men of genius on an equal footing with princes in their hours of relaxation. That Boccaccio, though he did not rank as orator or poet or professor of the classics

at this period—any one of which distinctions would have served as a sufficient passport—must have been remarkable for his talents, cannot indeed be questioned. The author of the "Decameron" was one of the most brilliant story-tellers whom the world has seen; and telling stories formed a favourite pastime with gentle men and women of the fourteenth century. Having once obtained the opportunity of displaying this gift, his society was sure to have been sought after. At any rate, his earliest essays in romance prove incontestably that he had mixed with fashionable people during the period of his first residence at Naples.

What his actual relations to la Fiammetta were, is dubious. He says that, on the occasion of their second meeting, she requested him to rehandle the old French romance of "Florie et Blanceflor." Obedient to her commands, he produced the prose-tale of "Filocopo." Beyond this account of their second meeting at a convent outside the walls of

Naples, we possess no definite record of their intercourse. If we were to trust the autobiographical passages of the "Ameto" and "Amorosa Visione," and to accept the novel of "Fiammetta" as anything approaching to real history, we should have to infer that she fully returned his passion. But all these works are precisely of that kind which Goethe termed "Truth and Fiction." It is clear in them that the poet and romancer has given free rein to his fancy. Fact is so embroidered and interfused with poetry that no inferences can be safely drawn from them. The case is different with Boccaccio's sonnets, which more even than Dante's and Petrarch's have the accent of spontaneous veracity. Their artistic inferiority secures for them a certain air of correspondence with truth. Many of these poems which are devoted to la Fiammetta, tell a very different tale from the fictions above mentioned. In them Boccaccio compares his mistress to a block of marble which no beams of love can warm, complains of her cruelty, disdain, and

icy coldness, and wonders, at the end of five years spent in adoration, whether she has ever cared to learn her lover's name. I think that his passion for Fiammetta was genuine, although he heightened and idealised its colour for the purpose of his art. But I see no reason to believe that it was reciprocated, or that he lived on terms of intimacy with the lady whose name was always on his lips. She certainly inspired him to compose the principal Italian works of his early manhood. For her he wrote "Filocopo." To her he dedicated the "Teseide" and "Filostrato." She is the heroine of "Ameto" and "La Fiammetta." She reappears in the "Amorosa Visione," and may be traced in "La Caccia di Diana" and the "Ninfale Fiesolano." Even in his masterpiece, the "Decameron," composed when her influence was clearly on the wane, he pays her homage. In fact, he chose her for his Muse, as poets in those days were wont to choose one lady around whose image they allowed their thoughts and sentiments to crys-

tallize until the vision became for them something between a reality and an ideal. It is necessary to form some conception of the peculiar conditions under which the imagination worked in an age of allegory and abstractions, in order to comprehend the tenacity with which men like Dante, Petrarch, Cino, Guido Cavalcanti, and Boccaccio clung to the names and memories of worshipped women, whose flesh-and-blood reality seems doubtful to us while we read about them. If Fiammetta emerges into more distinctness than Beatrice or Laura or Selvaggia, it is not perhaps because Boccaccio lived on terms of close intimacy with the mistress of his heart and Muse of his Parnassus, but because he was a novelist and not a lyric poet. The themes he handled under her inspiration bordered upon realism. In the process of working at them, he gave her a fictitious personality, which has led his readers to suppose that his relations to her were by no means of a merely ideal kind.

III

AMONG the Italian works which I have recently enumerated as due to Fiammetta's inspiration, "Filocopo" takes the first place. This is the earliest composition by Boccaccio known to us, and it deserves to be called the earliest monument of genuine Renaissance literature. In it appears for the first time that fusion of mediæval and classical material under forms of a distinctly hybrid modern art, that marriage of Faust and Helen, with the bizarre resultant birth of a new genius, which constitutes the real note of the transitional period known to us as Renaissance. Boccaccio adopted for his groundwork a romance of possibly Byzantine origin, which had already been popularised in several languages of Europe, and was well known to

the Italians of his day. His originality did not consist in the choice of subject—that was given him by Fiammetta—but in its handling. The main story became a framework for slightly connected episodes, for descriptions of landscape, for pictures of life, and for analyses of passion, interwoven with extraordinary luxuriance of fancy in a labyrinth of highly coloured scenes. Together with this addition of new motives and new sources of interest to the fable, an entirely new form is given to the manner of narration. The mythology of Greece and Rome makes sudden and imperious intrusion into the region of romance. Far-fetched terms are invented in order to accommodate this scholarly Olympus to the elements of Christian thought and the conditions of mediæval experience. We find ourselves, so far as literary form goes, transported into a conventional wonder-world of imagery, allusion, and rhetorical periphrasis. This explanation renders the reading of "Filocopo" at the present day well-nigh intolerable. Yet it was

precisely this which attracted contemporaries, not only by its novelty, but also by its adaptation to the taste of the Revival. Italian prose, again, which had hitherto been practised with the dove-like simplicity of the "Fioretti di S. Francesco," or with the grave parsimony of the "Vita Nuova," is now made to march in sonorous periods. The language, no less than the stuff and manner of "Filocopo," proclaims the advent of Renaissance art. In Petrarch the two streams of literature, which were destined to coalesce, had flowed apart. He wrote Italian verse with exquisite purity; and he attempted to restore classical culture with conscientious thoroughness. Boccaccio in his earliest experiment as author mixed the two sources. But so vivid was the poet's natural genius that, while accomplishing this revolution in manner, while so rehandling matter, he introduced at the same time a spiritual element, partly sensuous, party sentimental, partly scientific, which was neither classical nor mediæval, but emphatically modern. We must remember

that the people of Boccaccio's day were familiar with the story of "Filocopo." We must remember that they delighted in those long-drawn romances, and were accustomed to follow their labyrinthine windings with facility.

We must also remember that what seems to us rococo and affected in Boccaccio's mythological rhetoric and masquerade machinery, had for them the charm of brilliant style and learning genially displayed. What gives us trouble and inflicts fatigue, was fascinating at that epoch. Having then transported ourselves, so far as this is possible, into their atmosphere of thought and feeling, we shall be able to comprehend the enthusiasm which that glowing delineation of natural existence, those ardent outpourings of passion, that pompous and yet liquid diction, those finished landscapes, that richly coloured tone conveyed by aptly chosen words, inspired in men and women accustomed to mediæval directness or dreaminess. Boccaccio's originality in the "Filocopo" is incontestable. We may condemn his work

as artificial and its form as meretricious. We may deplore the direction which it gave to literature. But we shall be uncritical if we forget that such artificial work, such ornaments, such mixed species of art, were what the age of nascent humanism demanded, and that without them the Italians could not have arrived at the plastic perfection of Ariosto. The arras-work of this embroiderer, we say, is glittering, is splendid, is effective. But it is composed on radically false principles. It is not classical, it is not mediæval, it is not modern. True; but its originality consists precisely in the fact that it satisfied an age which was not classical, which was not mediæval, which was not modern. It fulfilled the needs of a transition-age, which had to reabsorb antiquity, to free itself from mediæval impediments, to appropriate the modern liberty of sense and intellect on lines of the least palpable resistance. To estimate the immediate influence of the "Filocopo" is difficult; to feel sure that it would have determined the course of Italian literature, if it had

stood alone, is impossible. But it was only the first of many similar productions by the same author; and reviewing these in their totality, we are justified in asserting that Boccaccio created for his nation the style which culminated in the "Cinque Cento." Men are more imitative than one commonly allows. But for this great writer's originality in perceiving that a hybrid form of art was adapted to his age, and expressive of its stirrings, but for the attractive examples which he gave of the mixed style, it is possible that Italian literature might have taken a very different course. Boccaccio intervened at a critical moment, and effected that junction between humanism and vernacular poetry which proved afterwards decisive for one of the world's most brilliant and fruitful epochs. Had he been suffered to pursue his own course of study unchecked in adolescence, this same result would not have been attained. We might have had a second Petrarch, of a somewhat diverse kind and calibre. We should certainly have had a more accomplished

scholar than Boccaccio became. He would have left behind him eclogues and epistles marked by purer Latinity, erudite treatises displaying a more intimate acquaintance with the spirit of the classics, and probably some ambitious monument of Italian verse in the allegorical or epic style. But we should not have possessed the "Filocopo," and many other works of the same order, which were formative of modern literature. What is noticeable in this first essay, is that its learning, though scattered broadcast over every page, remains that of a dilettante rather than a scientific student. Boccaccio employs it for adornment and stylistic purposes. He revels in it with the gusto of an epicure, for whom its antique flavour is delicious. Yet it has not penetrated his heart, or remade his intellect; nor has it moulded the inner substance of his art. On the other hand, the genial, the enduringly delightful elements in this romance — its feeling for nature, its experience of life, its keen apprecia-

tion of sensuous pleasure—could not have been acquired in the study of a scholar. Boccaccio owed these things to the fortune he bewailed at Virgil's tomb, to the hard necessity of wandering through many cities in pursuit of trade. We may pause to reflect upon the crooked ways whereby some men of genius are fashioned for their proper work. Had Boccaccio been free to follow his own bent in youth, he would have lost all this, which made him far more powerful in the future than his idol, Petrarch. Had his father succeeded in that cherished plan of shaping him into a merchant, he would have accumulated wealth, but the many aspects of the world would have been wasted on him. As it was, the idleness of those twelve years of misdirected energy, which he bewailed in middle life, and which was grief and sorrow to his parent, endowed the man, when he applied himself to literature, with special gifts and peculiar aptitudes. This idleness, while it precluded him from becoming a first-rate

Latin and Greek scholar, fitted him to found the Italian style of the coming age, and prepared him for his masterpiece, the "Decameron."

I have dwelt at some length upon "Filocopo," because it allowed me to say things which are generally applicable to the writings of Boccaccio's early manhood. In dealing with the rest, it will not be needful to repeat these observations.

While engaged upon the composition of "Filocopo" at Naples, Boccaccio was recalled by his father to Tuscany. That may have happened at the end of 1339, or perhaps in 1340. So far as we can see through the obscurity which involves his movements, Boccaccio remained at Florence or Certaldo until 1345, busily employed in literature. Those five years must certainly have formed the most productive period of his life. He was not happy in his native land. Florence, distracted by internal quarrels and enfeebled by commercial failures, had placed herself

under the protection of the Duke of Athens. Instead of being a wise dictator, Walter of Brienne proved himself a rapacious tyrant, and had to be expelled by force. The city was plunged still deeper into trouble by these commotions. Though Boccaccio never allowed himself to withdraw from study by public events, yet the disturbance of society around him must have been irksome to one who had been basking in the ease and luxury of Naples under King Robert's paternal government. Deeper discomforts rendered his present life distasteful. These arose from the incompatibility of views and temper between him and the elder Boccaccio. At the close of "Ameto," which must have been written soon after 1340, he draws a painful picture of their household. After reverting in strains of fervent enthusiasm to the delights which he had left behind at Naples, he proceeds to speak of his own Tuscan home:* "Here one laughs but seldom. The dark silent melancholy

* "Ameto," p. 199.

house takes and retains me much against my will; for here the sour and horrible aspect of an old man, frozen, uncouth, and avaricious, adds continual affliction to my saddened mood." Nothing but extreme irritation and dejection of spirits can have justified this portrait of his father, who, if we may trust Villani, was dealing with him generously. Again, in the "Amorosa Visione," composed at the same period, he describes the old Boccaccio among the misers, employed perpetually in scratching tiny morsels with his nails from a huge mountain of gold, his whole heart being set on money-making.*

It was in such circumstances, then, that the poems and prose fictions, with which we have now to deal, were composed. The "Ameto" may be described as an idyllic romance, written partly in verse and partly in prose. The scene is laid in Italy, but the story carries us to that ideal Arcadia, which fascinated the imagination of the Renaissance. "Ameto" is

* "Amorosa Visione," p. 59.

indeed the first of a long series of romantic idylls which became fashionable throughout Europe by the industry of Sannazzaro, Montemayor and Sidney. Critics have suggested that its form may have been derived from Petronius, or Apuleius, or "Aucassin et Nicolette." But such inquiries are to little purpose. In his "Ameto" Boccaccio projected a new species of literature, the pedigree of which can be traced in the imitations of successors, but which owed little to any pre-existing work. The romance was intended to show in what way wild and rustic natures may be humanised by love—a theme which the author rehandled in his novel of "Cimone."* The main story served, however, also as a framework for introducing a variety of episodes and secondary tales. Boccaccio's genius delighted in what the Italians call *intrecciatura*, that is, the interweaving of tale with tale upon a large tapestry of invention, Here, again, he determined the course of Renaissance fiction,

* "Decameron."

the special feature of which, especially in its finest poetry, is a luxuriant display of episodes, combined into a splendid whole by slender links of almost casual connection.

The "Amorosa Visione" was produced under the same conditions as "Ameto." It shows that Boccaccio was still wandering, uncertain of his destination, in the fields of literature. Having created romance of a new species in "Filocopo" and "Ameto," he reverted in this poem to the allegories of his predecessors. The "Amorosa Visione" is written in manifest rivalry with Dante, and with the "Trionfi" of Petrarch. It leads the soul through various contemplations of learning, fame, wealth, love, and fortune, to the supreme felicity of life. That, says the poet, is the union of intelligence and moral energy in an enthusiasm of the soul. Lower ambitions, on which the activities of men are usually spent, have to be abandoned in the search for happiness. We pursue the quest with some impatience to its long-deferred

conclusion. But when Boccaccio reveals his secret, the conclusion is discovered to be lame and impotent. The enthusiasm of the soul, to which he brings us, turns out to be the union of two beings in a mutual passion; and the "Amorosa Visione" closes in a paradise of sensual beatitude. Unless Boccaccio intended to satirise the mystical allegories of a former age, which I do not believe, he appears before us in this poem as a Balaam who blesses what the Muse had summoned him to curse. The fact is that he had no other prophecy to utter, and what he did utter he regarded as a prophecy. Like all his compositions at this period, the "Amorosa Visione" reveals the closing of one era and the opening of another. The forms of mediæval idealism are pressed into the service of Renaissance realism. Natural instinct, against which Dante strove with all his might, and which Petrarch clothed in the subtlest drapery of sentiment, is deified in an impassioned apotheosis.

The future author of the "Decameron" betrays himself unconsciously and all against his inclination in the "Amorosa Visione." The poem is furthermore remarkable, because it first exhibits an insincerity which became stereotyped in Renaissance literature. Time-honoured phrases and forms of art are used, which were adapted to obsolete modes of thinking and feeling about love. Chivalrous mysticism is no longer intelligible; but its symbols are retained for the expression of frank human appetite. This, at least, is how I read the "Amorosa Visione," and why I think it has a special value for the understanding of Boccaccio and his relation to the age which followed. After innumerable modifications, the doctrine of the "Amorosa Visione" found its ultimate expression in Marino's "Adone." Studying it, we are inclined to wonder how far the allegories of chivalry, upon which Boccaccio moulded his poem, had any correspondence to the truth of human feeling. It seems at first sight, if I may use two vulgar

metaphors, to knock the bottom out of them, to let the cat out of their imposing bag. But further consideration of the changes which were being wrought at that time in society, delivers us from this apparent paradox. Woman, in the Middle Ages, was not yet known as the companion, but either as the goddess or the slave of man. The Renaissance effected her emancipation from this dilemma. She took a new position in the scheme of life, which rendered the allegorical language of metaphysical chivalry inapplicable. Yet this language had to be retained through the transition period which followed, because it was respectful and was sanctioned by the best associations of civility emergent from a phase of semi-barbarism. The insincerities of the "Amorosa Visione" and of Renaissance lyric poetry conducted literature in this way to modern freedom of expression, in which feeling finds its own appropriate and natural vent.

The "Ninfale Fiesolano" is a tale in verse,

written certainly under Fiammetta's influence, which connects itself to some extent with the "Ameto." Under the form of a pastoral, it shows how gentle emotions lead to culture. Affrico is a shepherd of the hill-region behind Fiesole; Mensola is a nymph of Diana, dedicated to chastity. They meet and love. When Mensola has been changed into a fountain by the virgin goddess, whose vows she broke, the poem winds up with a myth invented to explain the founding of Fiesole. Civil society succeeds to the savagery of the woodland, and love is treated as the vestibule to refinement. The two parts of the poem, the romantic and the mythological, are ill-connected; and except in the long episode of Mensola's seduction, Boccaccio displays less than his usual power of narration. That episode might be separated from the rest. It breaks the style adopted for the beginning and conclusion of the poem, lapsing more than once into obscenity but thinly veiled by innuendoes in vogue among the Tuscans at

that period. It would not have been necessary to dwell upon this composition, except that we find in it another new species of art invented by Boccaccio—the versified novella—which afterwards proved so great a favourite with his successors. In the "Ninfale Fiesolano" he employed *ottava rima.* Critics for a long time believed that he was the creator of this stanza. But we know now that he borrowed it from the people and adapted it to the uses of polite literature.

Boccaccio made further use of the octave stanza in two epical poems of a more ambitious flight. Both have special interest for Englishmen, on account of their influence on our own literature. They are called "La Teseide" and "Filostrato." From the dedications, without dates, it appears that both poems were composed in the neighbourhood of Fiammetta; the former at some time when her lover had some reason to complain of her unkindness; the latter in the town of Naples, on some occasion when Fiammetta had removed into the

mountain region of the Abruzzi for change of air or other business.

The "Teseide" was founded on an ancient love-tale, which Boccaccio translated for the first time into modern language, decking it with rhyme and metre. It owes its title to the fact that the scene of the romance was laid at Athens in the reign of Theseus. The poem pretends to be an epic; but it is nothing really but an episode, capable of novelistic or dramatic treatment. From this point of view, the fable deserves our highest approbation, and the man who brought it into literary prominence must be acclaimed as an inventor. Palamon and Arcite, old friends and tried, are imprisoned in the same castle. Both see and love Emilia. It is arranged between them that they shall contend fairly with one another for the prize. Arcite, however, having been released from prison, treacherously employs his liberty in paying suit to Emilia. Finally, the two friends meet in the lists of chivalry. Arcite is wounded and dies; Pala-

mon wins the hand of Emilia. That is the bare outline of the story. Chaucer rehandled it in the "Knighte's Tale." Shakespeare and Fletcher dramatised it in "The Two Noble Kinsmen." Dryden retouched it in his incomparable poem of "Palamon and Arcite." And so the story has gone sounding on through the spacious times of English literature. But it was Boccaccio who first "fished the murex up," if I may use the metaphor of Robert Browning.

English literature owes a similar debt to "Filostrato." Chaucer founded his "Troilus and Creseide" upon this poem, while Shakespeare dramatised it in "Troilus and Cressida," Under the form of an epic, "Filostrato" is really a versified novel of the passions. In spite of Greek names and incidents borrowed from the tale of Troy, we feel ourselves to be studying some contemporary love-tale, narrated with the vigour of a master in the arts of story-telling and of psychological analysis. The dominant sentiments are as alien to the

heroism of the Homeric age, as they are congenial with the customs of a corrupt Italian city. All interest centres upon the three chief personages, Troilo, Pandaro, and Griseida. In Troilo a feverish type of character, overmastered by passion which is rather a delirium of the senses than a mood of feeling, has been painted with a force and fulness that remind us of the "Fiammetta," where the same disease of the soul is delineated in a woman. Pandaro exhibits an utterly depraved nature, revelling in seduction, glutting imagination with the spectacle of satiated lust. The portrait is ugly; but the execution is so masterly that we do not wonder at the name of this fictitious person having passed into common language to indicate the vilest of his sex. The frenzied appetite of Troilo, Pandaro's ruffian arts, and the gradual yieldings of Griseida to a voluptuous inclination reveal the hand of a great literary draughtsman. The second and third cantos of the poem are remarkable for their dramatic movement and

wealth of sensuous fancy, not rising to sublimity, not refined with the poetry of sentiment, but welling copiously from a genuinely ardent nature. The love described is nakedly and unaffectedly luxurious; it is an overmastering impulse, crowned at last with the joy of carnal fruition. Being only interested in the portrayal of his hero's love-languors, ecstasies, and disappointment, Boccaccio hurries the poem to a slovenly conclusion. In fact, "Filostrato" may be best described as the epic of the licentious and ephemeral amour.

The poems I have been reviewing are all of them distinguished by great qualities; by fecundity of invention, by originality of conception, by wealth of fancy and descriptive brilliance, by rapidity and vividness of narration. Yet, judged as poems, they leave much to be desired. The style is never choice, and often simply vulgar. In some parts the execution is unpardonably slovenly. Proportion is neglected. You feel that the author only sympathises

with certain aspects of his work, mainly the emotional, and that he was indifferent to the rest, because it did not stimulate his fancy. He gives the expression of being always in a hurry. There is a want of self-control, an absence of loving care. In other words, Boccaccio fails to be an artist in these compositions. When the verse is good, it sounds like the outpouring of his own desires and passions in self-indulgent improvisation. He does not, in the spirit of a true poetic artist, view the object from outside, and feel the paramount necessity of giving every part its proper value. To tell the tale with brief and hasty energy, to dilate upon its voluptuous incidents and themes of passionate emotion with burning rhetoric, satisfied his sense of poetry. In fact, he was working with inappropriate materials. Nature had made him an artist; but verse was not the vehicle his genius demanded; when he quitted verse for prose, he became a poet. It seems paradoxical to say this, when we remember that he gave the octave stanza and

the style of narrative poetry to Italian literature. Yet the imperfections of his efforts in verse composition cannot be otherwise explained.

Before quitting the Italian works of fiction which Boccaccio composed for Fiammetta, I must speak of the novel which bears her name. When, where, and whether Boccaccio wrote this novel, remains a puzzle. How far it is autobiographical, admits of grave doubt Accepting "La Fiammetta" as a piece of Boccaccio's writing, are we to take it as the record of personal experience? It seems almost impossible to do so. How could a book of this sort about a married woman have been given to the public by her titular lover? The story can be briefly told. Panfilo, under which name Boccaccio used to indicate himself, is compelled to leave Fiammetta at Naples, while he goes, at his father's command, to Florence. She hears that he has transferred his affections to another woman. This throws her into an agony of despair

and longing. She recalls the days of their past happiness together, upbraids him for his infidelity, and closes with a passionate prayer for his return. Panfilo is lost. But Panfilo might come again, and save her from the tomb. It is incredible that Boccaccio should have insulted Fiammetta and her husband by publishing these revelations, if they told the truth. It is equally incredible that he should have published confessions of that nature in her name, if they were fictitious. The brutality of the one course and the indelicacy of the other are alike inconceivable. No period of social corruption known to us, not even that of Naples under Queen Joanna, has been so abandoned as to accept scorching satire in lieu of compliment. Boccaccio could not have survived the husband's wrath, the wife's resentment, for one day, in Fiammetta's neighbourhood, after giving either this truth or this fiction to the world. The dilemma I have stated is so cogent that we are almost forced to choose one of two hypotheses:

either that "La Fiammetta" did not see the light till long after the time of its composition, or else that its attribution to Boccaccio is incorrect.*

After stating these critical difficulties, there remains no doubt that "La Fiammetta" is a very wonderful performance. It is the first attempt in modern literature to portray subjective emotion exterior to the writer. Since Virgil's "Dido," since the "Heroidum Epistolæ" of Ovid, nothing had been essayed in this region of psychological analysis. The picture of an unholy and unhappy passion, blessed with fruition for one brief moment, then cursed through months of illness and anxiety with the furies of vain desire, impotent jealousy, and poignant recollection, is executed

* There are some reasons for thinking that "La Fiammetta" was not written *by* Boccaccio, but rhetorically *for* Boccaccio by some writer acquainted with the legend of his love for Fiammetta. The MSS. date only from the middle of the fifteenth century. The style is not that of Boccaccio's early manhood; nor is it that of the "Decameron." Could Alberti have been the author of "La Fiammetta"?

with incomparable fulness of detail and inexhaustible wealth of fancy. The author of this extraordinary piece proved himself not only a consummate rhetorician by the skill with which he developed each motive furnished by the situation, but also a profound anatomist of feeling by the subtlety with which he dissected a woman's heart and laid bare the tortured nerves of anguish well-nigh unendurable. At the same time, "La Fiammetta" is full of poetry. The "Vision of Venus," the invocation to Sleep, and the description of summer on the Bay of Baiæ relieve the sustained monologue of passionate complaining, which might otherwise have been monotonous. The romance exercised a wide and lasting influence over the narrative literature of the Renaissance. It is so rich in material that it furnished the motives of many tales, and the novelists of the sixteenth century availed themselves freely of its copious stores. If we are right in assigning "La Fiammetta" to Boccaccio, it is clear that he at last had found his proper instrument of

art. The prose is no longer laboured and affected, as in "Filocopo" and "Ameto." Yet it has not attained that sparkling variety, that alternative of stately periods with brief but pregnant touches, which reveals the perfect master of style in the "Decameron."

IV

BOCCACCIO may have returned from Florence to Naples in 1344 or 1345. His father's second or third marriage probably determined this change of residence. Joanna, who had recently succeeded to the throne, paid him marked attention. According to a credible tradition, he began the "Decameron" at her command. It was during his second sojourn at Naples, therefore, that Boccaccio composed a large part of those novels which he afterwards combined into a masterpiece of well-proportioned art. The poet returned these favours of the Queen with devotion. This, while it revealed his warmth of heart, was hardly creditable to his character. In spite of her licentious life, in spite of the fact that he condemned her in a Latin

eclogue for the murder of her husband, he wrote the following panegyric upon Joanna:* "I regard her not only as an illustrious woman, conspicuous for brilliant qualities and splendid fame, but also as the special glory of Italy, the like of whom no other race has seen." Meanwhile, the whole of southern Italy was torn in pieces by the wars and factions which followed the assassination of Joanna's consort, Andrew of Hungary. Laid waste by savage troops from the Danube, pillaged by mercenaries gathered from the scum of Italian cities, afflicted by famine and pestilence, the kingdom of Naples must now have lost that ideal charm which it possessed for Boccaccio's pleasure-loving nature in the past. In 1349 we find him again at Florence, which was slowly recovering from the horrors of the preceding year. The Black Death is said to have destroyed 100,000 inhabitants of the Florentine domain—a truly frightful number when we remember how

* "De clar. mul.," cap. 104.

narrow were its limits at that period. Society was disorganised; the moral sense of the people brutified; government reduced to anarchy by this terrific blow. It is conjectured that Boccaccio's father, who died about 1348, perished of the plague. Probably the poet hastened home in order to secure his inheritance, and to take charge of his younger brother Jacopo. The fact that he divided the paternal estate with this brother, and that he was appointed Jacopo's guardian, seems to prove that his relations to the elder Boccaccio remained satisfactory up to the latter's death.*

Boccaccio had now reached the age of thirty-six. His main work, as a poet, had been accomplished, and he was about to enter on fresh phases of activity. He must have acquired considerable reputation as a man of letters; for we find him employed by the

* Boccaccio is mentioned as Jacopo's guardian in a deed dated Jan. 26, 1349 (Florentine style). In all probability Jacopo was the son of Bice, daughter of Ubardino de' Bostichi, whom the elder Boccaccio married about 1342–3. If his father died of the plague, he may have made no will.

Commonwealth of Florence on various public missions during the next sixteen years. Scholars enjoyed special advantages in this respect at the commencement of the Renaissance. Latin being the language of State-documents and diplomacy, they were engaged as secretaries, envoys, and orators on ceremonial occasions. I shall not dwell in detail upon Boccaccio's missions to Romagna and Ravenna, to the Court of Tyrol and the Pope. He does not appear to have been entrusted with business of any great political importance, and there are signs that he was not a very skilful negotiator. But one embassy of a more private character arrests attention, since it brought the two most eminent men of letters in Europe at that moment into relations alike flattering and honourable. I allude to a Commission from the Signoria of Florence given to Boccaccio in April 1351. He was sent to Padua, in order to inform Petrarch that the sentence of exile under which, as the son of a banished citizen, he had hitherto

been living, and the sequestration of his hereditary property, from which he had been suffering, would be removed, provided he returned to Florence and lent his powers of scholarship and rhetoric to the government of his native city.

There is some difficulty about deciding the exact year in which Boccaccio first set eyes on Petrarch. His biographers have conjectured that he may have witnessed the celebrated examination in poetry and rhetoric before King Robert of Anjou, which qualified Petrarch to receive the laurel crown at Rome. This took place in the spring of 1341, and the scheme I have adopted for determining the chronology of Boccaccio's early manhood renders his presence in Naples upon that occasion improbable. We know, however, for certain, that he entertained an enthusiastic admiration for the leading scholar and poet of his days from adolescence onward. In the autumn of 1350, when Petrarch came for the first time to Florence upon a journey to the

jubilee in Rome, Boccaccio entertained him in his house. Then began a friendship fruitful in results for Europe and glorious in the annals of world-literature. Petrarch was the elder by thirteen years. Boccaccio addressed him, with the tact of true devotion, as master, friend, philosopher, and guide. Petrarch's sensitive and somewhat egoistic nature genially expanded to the man in whom he recognised his only intellectual equal. In his correspondence with Boccaccio—a precious series of documents for the biography of both illustrious poets—we detect a note of reality, which is lacking in the letters addressed to Lælius, Simonides, and other shadowy personages of his inner circle. When they first met in 1350, the character of both was formed. Nothing could alter Petrarch, who pursued a singular self-chosen course from boyhood to old age. Boccaccio had learned to estimate his powers. Regretting the untoward circumstances which hindered him from becoming an accomplished scholar or conspicuous poet, he broke, as we

have seen, a new path for himself in literature. Step-mother fortune led him, almost against his will, to create Italian prose and to invent those many forms of art which mediated between humanism and the culture of his nation. The "Decameron" was already in existence. Therefore Petrarch's influence could not interfere with his disciple's development. But it strengthened his character, added seriousness to his conception of literature, raised him in his own esteem, and gave a fresh direction to his intellectual energies. After the formation of their friendship, which continued unbroken until Petrarch's death one year before his comrade's, Boccaccio devoted himself with earnestness to scholarship. His encyclopædic works on mythology, geography, and history, were compiled in the twenty years which followed 1350. We do not know their dates for certain. But the "Genealogia Deorum," the treatise "De Mortibus," etc., the biographical collections issued under the titles of "De casibus virorum illustrium" and "De

claris mulieribus," belong undoubtedly to this period. In the evolution of humanism they have a distinct value. Without being monuments of scientific philology, betraying as they do the talent of a dilettante rather than a thorough student, these works of patient industry performed a useful, nay, a necessary service in the Revival of Learning. They were the first attempts at what we should now call Dictionaries of Mythology, Geography, and Biography, compiled as introductions to classical erudition. They placed text-books, admirable for the state of knowledge at that time, within the reach of men who were destined to carry the Renaissance forward. The acquaintance with antique authors, the stores of digested knowledge revealed in them, are alike remarkable. How many MSS., copied for the most part with his own hand, must Boccaccio have studied and re-studied before he attained to the result displayed before us in those bulky volumes! He knew no royal roads to learning. He was making

them for others. And how genial, if often incorrect and always rude in style, is their manner of exposition! Criticism was then in its infancy; and Boccaccio, by the temper of his mind, was nothing less than critical. Consequently, scholars of the present day can afford to look down on them with contemptuous condescension. But the case was very different with Boccaccio's contemporaries. F. Villani and Domenico of Arezzo have no word to say about his "Decameron" and Italian poems. They laud him to the skies for these encyclopædic compilations. Monuments indeed are they of self-sacrificing labour and passionate enthusiasm in the early dawn and twilight of modern culture.

The composition of these books was by no means the last or the greatest service rendered by Boccaccio to the New Learning. At Petrarch's suggestion, he undertook to acquire Greek; and Europe must be ever grateful to him as the inaugurator of Greek studies. A Calabrian, named Leontius Pilatus,

who called himself a Greek in Italy and an Italian at Constantinople, came, perhaps at Boccaccio's invitation, to Florence in 1360. Though he was a man of repulsive exterior and intolerable conversation, Boccaccio received him into his own house, putting up with every inconvenience, and incurring considerable expense in order to obtain the precious possession of the Greek language, which Leontius was able to communicate. Under his roof at Florence the two men began to translate Homer into Latin. The version which Leontius dictated and Boccaccio reduced to literary form is a very poor performance. Yet Petrarch, who said that Homer in the original was dumb to him while he was deaf to Homer, welcomed it with reverence. It introduced the Father of Poetry to his eager admirers in the modern world, and stimulated a curiosity which has not yet been satiated.

Before quitting this period of Boccaccio's life, it is needful to glance at one of its less

agreeable episodes. At some time when he was well on in the forties, he paid his addresses to a Florentine widow. She repelled them with contempt and insult. He indulged his vengeance in a spiteful satire, entitled, "Il Corbaccio," or the "Laberinto d'Amore." It is written in vigorous Italian, with a malevolence and concentrated force of sarcasm which must have bitten like vitriol into its victim. Not only is the lady herself reviled, but the whole sex is painted in revolting colours. We could fancy that certain passages had been penned by a disappointed monk. They have the acrimony of jaundiced impotence. Though the "Corbaccio" is in tone unworthy of its author, it bore fruits in the literature of the next century. Alberti's Satires upon women are rhetorical amplifications of themes suggested by its invectives. Turning from this disgusting and profoundly immoral composition, it is pleasant to find Boccaccio sending a copy of the "Divine Comedy" to Petrarch. He had transcribed the poem with

his own hand, and accompanied it with a letter, recommending its perusal to his friend. Petrarch was so sensitively vain that Boccaccio ran no little risk of stirring his resentment. Yet he contrived to humour the great man's self-conceit with such delicate tact that Petrarch graciously accepted the gift and acknowledged it in a memorable epistle. This happened in 1359.

Two years after that date, in the summer of 1361, a singular event happened, which throws interesting light upon Boccaccio's character. A Carthusian monk, named Pietro de' Petroni, died in the preceding May at Siena. He was eminent for piety, and on his death-bed he claimed to have had special intimations regarding some of his most illustrious contemporaries. Heaven and Hell were opened to his eyes in vision. He saw the bliss of saints, the torments of the damned. When he awoke from this ecstasy, he commanded a brother of the order and his own disciple to carry a message to certain persons,

whose sinful ways of life would bring them to eternal ruin unless they repented in due time. Among them was Boccaccio. Accordingly, Gioachino Ciani—such was the name of Pietro de' Petroni's ambassador—came to him in Florence, and communicated the terrifying message. It produced a sudden and overwhelming effect. In his first agitation Boccaccio determined to abandon study, to give up his library, to obliterate, so far as in him lay, his light and amatorious works of poetry and fiction, finally to make himself a monk or enter into priest's orders. Fortunately, before committing himself to all or any of these steps, he wrote to consult Petrarch. An answer, firm in tone and sound in judgment, combining the truest wisdom with the tenderest sympathy, arrived from Padua. Petrarch, with the humane sense which distinguished him in that age of superstition and credulity, argued against the authority of death-bed intimations. He admitted that it would indeed be well for

Boccaccio to increase in piety and seriousness with his advancing years. At the same time he pointed out that the pursuits of poetry and literature, in which his life had been employed, were by no means incompatible with sincere religion. This advice, at once consoling and admonitory, coming from a man of Petrarch's known ascetic bent, acted like a tonic on his friend. Boccaccio retained his library and continued his studies in philology. So far as we have certain knowledge, he did not take religious vows of any kind, although a report was current among his contemporaries that he had entered the Carthusian Order. But from the date of this so-called conversion, he became a sadder and a wiser man. He besought his friends to abstain from the reading of his own "Decameron," * and no doubt he bitterly deplored the profligate and odious "Corbaccio." Poetry was over for him. But he preserved his

* See his letter to Maghinardo de' Cavalcanti, written perhaps in the autumn of 1372.

interest in scholarship, and worked assiduously at this branch of literature.

In the same year, 1361, Boccaccio received an invitation to Naples from his old friend and patron Niccolo Acciaiuoli, now one of the most powerful princes of that realm. He accepted it, and journeyed thither with his brother Jacopo. But the entertainment assigned him at Niccolo's orders, by no means corresponded with his expectations. It appears that the great man had begged him to compose his life, and that Boccaccio refused the office. This accounts for the frigid greeting and the sordid hospitality he met with. We possess a wonderful description of his misery at Naples in the form of a letter addressed to Niccolo's secretary, Francesco de' Nelli. This composition, like the "Corbaccio," proves that Boccaccio had the gifts of a great and formidable satirist. It paints the weaker sides of the Grand Seneschal's character with trenchant force and evident veracity. If half what the writer says be true, regarding his scurvy treat-

ment in the Neapolitan hovel allotted to him, his resentment was assuredly justified. Yet there is a kind of ignobility in his complaining, a something which reminds us of the inevitable old bachelor, the self-important man of letters, and the confirmed comedian, in its tone. Dante tasting the salt of Can Grande's bread, Johnson turned away from Lord Chesterfield's door, both felt and spoke very differently. Here, as in so many ways, Boccaccio showed himself a true child of the Renaissance. He was essentially *bourgeois*, occupied with little things and and careful about trifles. His personal pettishness enfeebled the masterly strokes of his satire. Looking across the next two hundred years, when the Renaissance was well-nigh over, we find the same fretful tone, the same whining, the same brooding over pitiful affronts, in Tasso.

I shall not follow the events of Boccaccio's career with minuteness through the next ten years. We hear of missions to Urban V. at Avignon and Rome, of a long delightful resi-

dence with Petrarch on the Riva degli Schiavoni at Venice, and of another visit to Naples in 1371. Niccolo Acciaiuoli was dead and buried in his sumptuous *certosa* near the walls of Florence. So Boccaccio had no insulting patron and no vindicative enemy to fear. Like a ghost, he wandered once more and for the last time through those enchanting scenes from which his inspiration had been drawn in youth. We may perhaps refer to this occasion a story of Boccaccio's visit to Monte Cassino, told by his disciple Benvenuto da Imola in the Commentary upon Dante.

With the advance of old age, Boccaccio suffered severely from bodily afflictions. They were as numerous and as tormenting as those described by Browning in "The Grammarian's Funeral." Yet, like Browning's Grammarian, he continued to be brave and arduous in study. When he had reached the age of sixty, that is to say, in 1373, some Florentine citizens received permission from the Government to found a chair for the exposition of the

"Divine Comedy." Boccaccio was appointed the first Reader. He began to lecture in the Church of San Stefano upon the 23rd of October, and discharged the functions of his chair until the spring of 1375. The "Comento Sopra Dante," a voluminous work, displaying a large amount of miscellaneous learning, was the fruit of this activitiy. It is divided into fifty-nine lectures, and is carried down to "Inferno," xvii. 17.

Having considered Boccaccio as poet, novelist and scholar, we have now to regard him from a different point of view. His originality and openness of mind to all great things in literature were no less conspicuous in the enthusiasm he felt for Dante than in his reverence for Petrarch and application to Greek studies. This enthusiasm contributed much to propagating an interest in the "Divine Comedy." We are even justified in surmising that, but for Boccaccio's influence, the chair which he filled so honourably might not have been founded. He certainly professed a cult

for Dante long before that epoch. I have already mentioned his gift of the "Divine Comedy" to Petrarch; and we must refer his "Vita di Dante" to some comparatively early period of his life—perhaps to the year 1350, when the Florentines sent him to Ravenna with a present of ten golden florins for the poet's daughter. This Life, as he informs us in the preface, was intended as a slight amend to Dante's memory for his exile and for the lack of any monument in Florence. The honours which the Commonwealth refused to her most noble son, he wished to supply with his poor faculty of writing. He chose Italian for the purpose, instead of Latin, in order that his panegyric might reach the ears of the unlettered vulgar. Such was Boccaccio's inducement to compose the "Life of Dante," a work which he doubtless did not fail to circulate. The book has no critical or historical value; but it presents many points of interest. Like everything written by Boccaccio, it is eminently readable, in spite

of the heterogeneous learning with which the narrative is weighted. It reveals the heartiest veneration for all things noble and praiseworthy in the realm of literature. Its author's admiration for the divine poet is sincere and ungrudging. Yet it betrays an astonishing want of sympathy with Dante's character, and transforms the sublime romance of the "Vita Nuova" into a commonplace novel of sentiment. Boccaccio is unable to comprehend how even Dante could have fallen in love with Beatrice at the age of nine. He conjectures that the sweet season of May, the good wines and delicate meats of the Portinari banquet, all the sensuous delights of a Florentine festival, turned the boy into a man. Dante spoke of Beatrice as the "youngest of the angels." Boccaccio draws a lively picture of this angel in the flesh, as he imagined her. In his portrait there is less of the angelic than the carnal nature visible. Beatrice becomes one of the beauties of his own prose fictions. All this he does in

absolute good faith, with the honest desire to exalt Dante above every poet, and to spread abroad the fame of his illustrious life. But the founder of Renaissance art was incapable of comprehending the real temper of the man he deified. Between him and the enthusiasms of the Middle Ages a ninefold Styx already rolled its waves.

The "Commentary on the Divine Comedy" was Boccaccio's last considerable work. In 1374 a severe blow depressed his spirits, shaken by old age and illness. This was the news of Petrarch's death. Perhaps he wrote the "Urbano," a simple and harmless tale, to distract his mind from grief. But the genuineness of this work is subject to considerable doubt. Anyhow it was not long before he received the summons to follow his friend upon the journey from which none return. He died at Certaldo upon the 21st of December, 1375, and was buried in the church there.

V

THE plan of this study made me defer all notices of the "Decameron" for its conclusion; nor do I intend to enter with particularity into antiquarian problems regarding Boccaccio's masterpiece.

He was fond of giving his books clumsily compounded Greek names. Thus we have "Filostrato" (φιλεῖν and στρατός), "Filocopo" (φιλεῖν and κόπος), "Teseide" (Θησηΐς). It is probable, therefore, that the title "Decameron" (δέκα ἡμέραι) was invented by himself. The sub-title, "Il Principe Galeotto," has been interpreted to mean, The Prince of Pandars, from a famous line in Dante's episode of "Francesca da Rimini." * That Boccaccio did not invent this sub-title, can be well imagined. Yet, in

* "Inferno," v. 137.

his commentary on the line to which I have alluded,

Galeotto fu il libro, e chi lo scisse,

he explained how "Galeotto" came to be synonymous with go-between or pandar;* and in a letter to Maghinardo de' Cavalcanti, cited above, he avowed his belief that the "Decameron" might lead women astray by its seductions.

Great pains have been taken to investigate the sources used by Boccaccio in the composition of his tales. Men like Landau in Germany and Bartoli in Italy have ransacked the stores of Indian, Arabic, Byzantine, French, Provençal, Hebrew, and Spanish fables, with the view of tracing resemblances between the "Decameron" and pre-existing literature of various sorts. It has been shown by these researches that very few of Boccaccio's stories are original, in the sense of having been invented by himself. Like Shakespeare, he used materials ready to his

* "Montier," vol. xi. p. 61.

hand, wherever he found something to the purpose of his art. But scholarship of this sort has introduced a somewhat false note into our criticism of the subject. We are, as it were, invited to believe that Boccaccio possessed a polyglot library of fiction, which he consulted in the course of composition. The truth is that story-telling was a favourite pastime in the Middle Ages, and that very few good stories are new. From Hindostan, from Baghdad, from Greek and Roman books on history, from the folk-lore of Teutonic and Celtic races, from a thousand-and-one sources, anecdotes were freely taken up, which passed into the common substance of the mediæval mind. They circulated from lip to lip between the Ganges and the Seine. They were the property of everybody. Thus the learned investigations to which I have referred, are interesting, because they show how large and various a stock of stories were current in the days before Boccaccio wrote. But such researches have small importance

for the criticism of the "Decameron" as a work of art. They only prove his wide acquaintance with the tales of many lands, as these formed elements of social culture common to his race.

The same line of treatment might be adopted with regard to the charge of plagiarism from North French tale-tellers, which has been brought against Boccaccio by sensitive French patriots. It is true that he borrowed largely from the *fabliaux;* and what is more to the purpose, he adopted the style of narration in use among Trouvères, Ménestrels and Jongleurs. Such professors of the arts of entertainment pervaded Europe, and undoubtedly haunted the Angevine Court at Naples. An artist of Boccaccio's stamp, born to excellence, appreciative of the slightest hints of mastery in the trade he had adopted, certainly learned much from these men. He learned from them in the same way as Mozart learned from fashionable composers of Italian opera. But when we compare their work with

his, the charge of plagiarism becomes almost comic. Comic indeed is not the word for it. I would rather say that the man who makes such charges, writes himself down thereby a dullard in the art of criticism. He is incapable of perceiving the bottomless gulf which yawns between old French *fabliaux*, humorous, obscene, disconnected, with blunt native glimpses into human character, and that stately art-work which we call "Decameron," completely finished, fair in all its parts, appropriately framed, subordinated to one principle of style, with the master's Shakespearian grasp on all heights and depths, on the kernel and the superficies, the pomp and misery, the pleasures and the pangs of mortal life.

Where Boccaccio found his stories, matters little. How he formed his style of narrative, matters equally little. These questions have their antiquarian interest indeed; and at leisure moments readers of the "Decameron" would do well to consider them. But the critic

has to avoid such side-issues, after mastering their points and giving them due weight. He must remind people that the real question is, not where Boccaccio found his stories, nor how he acquired his style, but whether he used those stories and employed that style in a way to distinguish him from all his predecessors, and to make the "Decameron" a monumental work of modern art.

Comparing Boccaccio, not with previous mediæval story-tellers, who are nowhere in the reckoning, but with himself as literary craftsman, we pronounce that in the "Decameron" he accomplished that to which his earlier writings of every sort in Italian poetry and prose had been but preludes. These essays of his immaturity were marked by misdirected energy, by euphuism sprung from a mixed literary impulse, by want of proportion, by declamatory monologue directed towards the author's self as audience. The "Decameron" emerges into the clear atmosphere of perfected objective art. We do not feel the

author's subjectivity, his longings and his disappointments. He paints actual men and women, dealing with them humorously or sympathetically, exhibiting their nobleness, bringing their foibles and deformities into relief, even as light falling round an object does. He has ceased to declaim. There is no haste, no disproportion in the work. Each tale is told in its appropriate manner; and all the tales are built into a stately palace-house, wherein the mind of man may walk for solace or instruction through well-planned and spacious chambers. The style, though artificial, has disengaged itself from pedantries and hesitations. Handled as it is handled here, Boccaccio's Italian prose proclaims its fitness to be used for every purpose, serious or gay, coarse or sentimental, elegiac or satirical, descriptive or analytical, rhetorical or epigrammatic. Changing, according to the master's mood, within the bounds of equable and polished diction, it is suited to every whim or exigency of stylistic utterance.

The "Decameron" has been called the "Commedia Umana." This title is appropriate, not merely because the book portrays human life from a comic rather than a serious point of view, but also because it forms the direct antithesis of Dante's "Commedia Divina." The great poem and the great prose fiction of the fourteenth century are opposed to each other as Masque and Anti-masque. The world of the "Decameron" is not an inverted world, like that of Aristophanes. It does not antithesise Dante's world by turning it upside down. It is simply the same world surveyed from another side, unaltered, uninverted, but viewed in the superficies, presented in the concrete. Dante, in the "Divine Comedy," attempted a revelation of what underlies appearances and gives them their eternal value. He treated of human nature in relation to God, of life upon this earth in relation to life beyond the grave. Boccaccio deals with appearances, and does not seek to penetrate below experience. He

paints the world as world, the flesh as flesh, nature as nature, without suggesting the question whether there be a spiritual order. Human life is regarded by him as the plaything of fortune, humour, appetite, caprice. Dante saw the world in the mirror of his soul. Boccaccio looked upon it with his naked eyes; yet poet and novelist dealt with the same stuff of humanity, and displayed equal comprehensiveness in treating it.

The description of the Plague at Florence which introduces the "Decameron," has more than a merely artistic appropriateness. Boccaccio's taste might be questioned for bringing that group of pleasure-seeking men and maidens into contrast with the horrors of the stricken city. Florence crowded with corpses, echoing to the shrieks of delirium and the hoarse cries of body-buriers, forms a background to the blooming garden, where birds sing, and lovers sit by fountains in the shade, laughing or weeping as the spirit of each tale constrains their sympathy. Remembering that

these glad people have shunned the miseries which weigh upon their fellow-creatures, our first impulse is to shrink with loathing from their callousness. But the reflection follows, that black Death is hovering near them too, and may descend with sweeping scythe at any moment on their paradise.* This introduction, therefore, suggests a moral for Boccaccio's "Human Comedy." The brilliant masquerade of earthly life which he has painted with such inexhaustible variety, has the grave behind it and before it, and Death is ever passing to and fro among the dancers. Meanwhile men eat and drink, sing and play, sleep at nightfall and rise refreshed in dewy morning, for new pleasures, unmindful of the hospital, the battlefield, the charnel-house. Boccaccio was too great an artist to point this moral in a work of mirth and relaxation. There it is, however, like the grinning skeleton who threads the mazes of a *Danse Macabre.*

* Orcagna, or whoever else painted the "Triumph of Death" in the Pisan Campo Santo, seems to have felt this.

The description of the Plague has another undesigned significance. A Florentine chronicler of those times, Matteo Villani, dates the progressive deterioration of manners and the political anarchy which followed from the Black Death of 1348. The Plague was, therefore, an outward sign, if not the efficient cause, of those moral and social changes which the "Decameron" immortalised in literature. It was the historical landmark between two ages, dividing mediæval from Renaissance Italy. The cynicism, liberated in that period of terror, lawlessness and sudden death, assumed in Boccaccio's romance a beautiful and graceful aspect. His art softened its harsh and vulgar outlines, giving it that air of genial indulgence which distinguished Italian society throughout the heyday of the Renaissance.

Boccaccio selects seven ladies of ages varying from eighteen to twenty-eight, and three men, the youngest of whom is twenty-five. Having formed this company, he transports them to a villa two miles from the city, where

he provides them with a train of serving-men and waiting-women, and surrounds them with the delicacies of mediæval luxury. Their daily doings form the framework in which the stories of the "Decameron" are set. He is careful to remind us that, though there were lovers in that band of friends, "no stain defiled the honour of the company;" yet these unblemished maidens listen with laughter and a passing blush to words and things which outrage our present sense of decency. Nothing is more striking in the "Decameron" than the refinement of the framework contrasted with the coarseness of the pictures which it frames. I do not think that Boccaccio violated the truth of fact for the purpose of his art. Plenty of proof exists that the best society of the period found entertainment in discussing themes which would now be scarcely tolerated in a barrack.

The light but remorseless satire of the "Decameron" spares none of the ideals of the age. All the mediæval enthusiasms are

reviewed and criticised in the spirit of a Florentine citizen. It is as though the *bourgeois*, not content with having made nobility a crime, were bent upon extinguishing its essence. Indeed, the advent of the *bourgeois* is the most significant note of the times to which Boccaccio belonged. Agilulf vulgarises the chivalrous conception of love ennobling men of low estate, by showing how a groom, whose heart is set upon a queen, avails himself of opportunity. Tancredi burlesques the knightly reverence for stainless scutcheons by the extravagance of his revenge. The sanctity of the "Thebaid," that ascetic dream of purity and self-renunciation, is made ridiculous by Alibech. Ser Ciapelletto casts contempt upon the canonisation of saints. The confessional, the adoration of reliques, the priesthood, the monastic orders, are derided with the deadliest persiflage. Christ himself is scoffed at in a jest which points the most indecent of these tales. Matrimony affords a never-ending theme for scorn; and

when, by way of contrast, the novelist paints an ideal wife, he runs into such hyperboles that the very patience of Griselda is a satire on the dignity of marriage. It must not be thought that Boccaccio was a bad Churchman because he unsparingly attacked the vices of the clergy and the superstitions of his age. The contrary is amply proved. In those times, when there was no thought of schism from the Mother Church of Christendom, a man might speak his mind out freely without being arraigned for heresy. Not until the Reformation created a panic, and pushed Rome to extremities in the Catholic reaction, was the "Decameron" condemned to expurgation and placed upon the "Index."

This is not the place to discuss in detail the stories of the "Decameron." The book lies open to English readers, who ought to take it as its author meant it to be taken—to look upon it mainly as a source of pleasure for all times. It would be easy to fill many learned pages with disquisitions on its potency

in modern literature, to show how imaginative art of every sort in Italy was penetrated with its spirit, how Chaucer felt its influence in England, and how a princess of the House of Valois reproduced it in the French Renaissance. I am inclined to think that such disquisitions impair the satisfaction which we have in finding out those obvious relations for ourselves. There is a certain charm in exploring rivulets of literature, tracing them to their source in some large lake like the "Decameron," noticing their divergence, detecting their specific quality, and testing as a final effort of analysis the meeting of many old-world waters in the reservoir itself.

NOTE ON THE PLACE AND MANNER OF BOCCACCIO'S BIRTH

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WE have good reason to believe that Boccaccio was born in 1313. But it is impossible to say for certain where he was born, or whether he was born in wedlock. Until recently his biographers accepted the tradition that his father, whom we know to have been resident in Paris during the year 1313, formed an attachment there with a Frenchwoman, and that Boccaccio was the fruit of their love. This tradition rests upon the Italian version of Filippo Villani's "Vite d' uomini illustri Fiorentini." Filippo Villani, I may observe, was Boccaccio's contemporary and his successor in the Chair founded at Florence for the explanation of Dante. He continued his father Matteo Villani's Chronicle in the vulgar tongue, and composed short biographies of several eminent Florentines. In this Life of Giovanni Boccaccio, then, we read: "His father was Boccaccio of Certaldo, a village of the Florentine domain, and was a man distinguished by excellence of manners. The course of his

commercial affairs brought him to Paris, where he resided for a season, and being free and pleasant in the temper of his mind, was no less gay and well-inclined to love by the complexion of his constitution. Thus, then, it fell out that he was inspired with love for a girl of Paris, belonging to the class between nobility and *bourgeoisie*, for whom he conceived the most violent passion; and, as the admirers of Giovanni assert, she became his wife, and afterwards the mother of Giovanni" (p. 29). Domenico of Arezzo, also a contemporary of the poet, and what is more significant, a friend of Petrarch, wrote a Latin life of Boccaccio, in which the same story is repeated, with this difference, that doubt is now thrown upon his father's marriage to the Frenchwoman: "His father Boccaccio was a man of intelligence, and of sagacity in commerce, who, while residing at Paris in the course of business, fell violently in love with a girl of that city; and this girl, as Giovanni's admirers assert, although the other opinion is more frequent, was afterwards married by him, and became the mother of Giovanni" (p. 31). It will be noticed that both the translator of Filippo Villani and Domenico of Arezzo refer to admirers and friends of Boccaccio. Thus stood the tradition of Boccaccio's birth until the Latin version of Filippo Villani's biographies came to light. Here we find: "He was born at Certaldo, from his natural father Boccaccio, a man of industry." The word *natural* ought, according to classical usage, to

signify *his own* as opposed to an *adoptive* parent. But room is left for doubt whether Filippo Villani did not imply that the father's connection with the mother was illicit. Further obscurity is added to the whole question by a sonnet, ascribed to Giovanni Acquettini, and written to all appearances at the end of the fourteenth century, in which Boccaccio is made to say: "I was born at Florence at Pozzo Toscanelli, and now lie buried in Certaldo." This sonnet, however, is not very trustworthy, since it asserts that Boccaccio received the poet's crown in Rome from the Emperor Carl — an honour of which his biographers affirm nothing. Moreover, the fact that Boccaccio's father possessed a house in Sta Felicità, the Quarter where Pozzo Toscanelli was situated, proves little. Acquettini's assertion may indeed have been deduced merely from his knowledge of this fact. It is of more importance to examine what can be gathered directly from Boccaccio himself upon these topics. To begin with, we find that he never mentioned his mother's name, nor did he refer in set terms to his own birthplace. For signature, he commonly used the forms "Joannes Boccaccius" and "Giovanni da Certaldo"; in his will he describes himself as "Joannes olim Boccaccii de Certaldo," and in the epitaph written by him for his tomb he spoke of "Patria Certaldum." Certaldo is noticed in his work on mountains, woods etc., as the home of his ancestors before they were received

into the burghership of Florence. There is, in fact, no doubt, from the general tenor of his own writings, that Boccaccio regarded himself as the son of a Florentine citizen, whose ancestral and paternal seat was the village of Certaldo. But he says nothing directly whereby we can determine the rank and nationality of his mother, the exact place where he was born, and the truth about his own legitimacy.

With regard to this last point, of legitimacy, I see slender reason to doubt it, and strong reasons for assuming it. Boccaccio was always treated as a full Florentine burgher, employed on embassies, and admitted to small offices of public trust. He divided his father's estate with his surviving brother, retaining the ancestral mansion at Certaldo, which he afterwards, by his own will, settled upon all male descendants, whether legitimate or illegitimate, of the old Boccaccio. This, in the absence of his father's will, justifies an assumption that he was regarded as the eldest son. Upon the question of legitimacy, it must, however, be added, that a deed for his legitimisation by Papal authority is said to have been seen in the seventeenth century by Suares, Bishop of Vaison, at Avignon, while Cosimo della Rena, a writer of the seventeenth century, calls him "Figlio legittimato." The deed in question was presumably intended to fit him for taking orders in the Church. But this document, though searched for, has not been brought to light yet;

and we have no sufficient evidence to show that he ever availed himself of it. He held no benefice; and the circumstances which have been adduced to prove that he took orders—the title of *Venerabilis* in his will, and his bequest of a breviary and utensils for saying Mass—are too slender to support an argument.

Two points have still to be brought forward. The first is that Boccaccio's father was twice married, and lost both of his wives during Boccaccio's lifetime; the first about 1339–40, the second before 1349. Neither of these wives can be regarded as Boccaccio's mother. He must therefore have been the son of a third and earlier woman, whether wife or mistress, of whom we know absolutely nothing. So far as this goes, it adds some probability to the story of his birth by the French girl whom his father loved in Paris.

The other point to be considered is of more importance. In the "Ameto," which we know to contain the secret of Boccaccio's love for Fiammetta, he says that Fiammetta's parents were descended from French ancestors, that he himself (named Caleone in the novel) was born not far from the place whence Fiammetta's mother drew her origin, that in his boyhood he explored the regions of Tuscany, and that in his riper years he came to Naples. In another part of the same book the story is related of a young Italian merchant not distinguished by birth or gentle breeding, who went to Paris and there seduced a

young French widow. The fruit of their intercourse was a boy, who received the name of Ibrida. Now it is pretty certain that, in the person of Caleone, Boccaccio is speaking of himself; and this being so, he has asserted that his mother, like Fiammetta's parents, was of French blood. But there is some difficulty in identifying him also with Ibrida, a secondary and quite independent person in the story. At the same time, the way in which Ibrida's history is told, raises the suspicion of autobigraphical intention.

That Boccaccio ought to have refrained from exposing his father's disloyalty to his mother, is no argument against the attribution of Ibrida's history to his own life. Unfortunately, he was on very unsatisfactory terms with his father precisely at the time when he composed "Ameto." In the last poem of that romance, he describes Naples in strains of glowing enthusiasm, and then turns to speak of his own Tuscan home. "Here one laughs but seldom. The dark silent melancholy house keeps and holds me much against my will, where the sour and horrible aspect of an old man, frigid, uncouth, and miserly, continually adds affliction to my saddened mood." Again, in the "Amorosa Visione," composed at the same period, he describes his father as one employed perpetually in scratching tiny morsels from a huge mountain of gold, his whole bent being set on money-making.

It is more to the purpose to remark that Boccaccio

cannot have wished the whole world to know his private history, and that any allusions to Fiammetta's lover in the "Ameto" were possibly intended to mislead the public. In effect, an early misunderstanding of those passages about Caleone and Ibrida may have been the origin of the legend which we find in the Italian version of Filippo Villani's life and in Domenico of Arezzo's short biography.

The total result of this inquiry to my mind is that we do not know for certain where Boccaccio was born, that his mother has not been identified, and that his illegitimacy is, to say the least, not proven.

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co.
London & Edinburgh

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